

ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR SUNDAY BEFORE LENT 2017

Yesterday, I was reading about someone who was described as having had a "lifelong dispute with religion" and as being an "Anglican agnostic". For our purposes at present, it really does not matter who that person was. It is simply the case that I found the description of her as being one that might well fit most people present at any church service in this country on any Sunday in the course of any year. Most of us, I suspect, have a "lifelong dispute with religion" and, if we should claim to be Anglican, are probably "Anglican agnostics".

That is why, when I preach a sermon, I am not so much aware of an obligation to 'proclaim' or to 'declaim' as of a compulsion to invite those who have the patience to listen to me to embark on some sort of exploration. What I have to say today will be said in that vein.

Some of you will be familiar with a work called **Dies Natalis** by the composer Gerald Finzi. It has been described as one of the masterpieces of twentieth century English music. If you do happen to know it, you are most likely to be aware that the words that are set to music are taken from the work of the seventeenth century writer Thomas Traherne, and reflect the joy and wonder of a child's innocent view of the world.

In the third of what are called his **Centuries (Centuries of Meditations)**, Traherne writes of his childhood perceptions. "The corn", he says "was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown." "The dust and the stones of the street were as precious as gold." Old men seemed like "Immortal Cherubims." Young men "Glittering and sparkling angels", maids "strange and seraphic pieces of life and beauty", and "Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels." And then, the words: "Eternity was manifest in the Light of Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared." "Something infinite behind everything appeared."

We often associate with childhood such unspoiled experiences in which the dividing line between time and eternity becomes blurred, or even erased, and in the course of which we experience some kind of unity with everything around; profound harmony. "Heaven," Wordsworth wrote, "lies about us in our infancy!" Perhaps it is in our early years that we most readily perceive, without actually naming it, "Something infinite behind everything".

Possibly it is also true, as Wordsworth went on to claim, that "Shades of the prison house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy." Perhaps a natural spiritual instinct becomes dulled with the years; buried under the pressures and concerns of our busy lives; silenced by the noisy turbulence of our ever-anxious minds.

Yet, even for the most mentally preoccupied or hardest-hearted of us, it is never quite expunged. There is something mysterious about us; we human beings. Somewhere, at the very core, we can be surprisingly awakened; stirred. Music can catch us out. The night sky can startle. Kindness can move us. The breaking of waves upon the sea shore can lift us above the humdrum hurts of life. The sight of a mountain range can call out of us sheer exultation. A single line of poetry can bring us almost undreamt-of peace. It just breaks in upon us, time and time again – this feel for "something infinite behind everything"; an intuition that heaven lies about us; the experience of all division coming into harmony.

The moment passes all too quickly, and we are left wondering quite what to make of things. Has all been illusion or delusion; a trick of the imagination? Or have we touched upon reality? Could

it be that we have, by grace, been given some anticipation of, a vision of, a world that will one day come; creation, as the twentieth century poet Elizabeth Jennings put it, "Planned and purposed and somehow achieved by love"? And could it be that the hunger we are left with, that ache in the soul, is in fact a response to the God who lures us ever onwards to the destiny He has in mind for us? Might it be that this complicated mix of body, mind and spirit is tuned to pick up signals of what we can only call 'eternity'?

Our New Testament reading this morning comprised St Matthew's account of the Transfiguration. You will remember that Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain. No doubt, these Galilean fishermen would have felt, as they watched the sun rise above the waters, or witnessed from time to time the miraculous flowering of the wilderness, the impinging of eternity upon the temporal. But now, they were to see all this revealed through a single human being. They saw his face shine like the sun, his clothes become dazzling white, and his whole being shot through with God's glory, and they experienced, in clouded mystery, the very presence of the Father. It was through Jesus, through Jesus more than any other thing or person, that they glimpsed "something infinite behind everything".

The moment quickly passed. Outwardly, quite soon, things were as they had been before. But now, in a way that they would never forget, those three disciples were assured that God's luring us ever onwards to the destiny He has in mind for us is channelled most precisely, definitively and most powerfully, through the life of Jesus Christ.

Of course, there remain doubts about the historical accuracy of the account of the Transfiguration. Yet, down through the centuries, Christians have heard through it 'the ring of truth'. Like those disciples, Christians amongst whom we might well count ourselves, have perceived through Jesus "something infinite behind everything".

You might wonder, however, why the story of the Transfiguration should be told today, just before we set out on our journey through Lent; our journey to Good Friday. I believe it is the Gospel of St John that provides an answer.

The story of the disciples seeing upon the mountain top, through Jesus, the "something infinite behind everything" is recorded in the Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke. Strangely, St John makes no mention of it. This is because, for him, the greatest disclosure of God's glory, the definitive revelation of "something infinite behind everything", was to be what took place upon the cross; the end of our Lenten pilgrimage. He allows no room for us to be sentimental or indulgent when it comes to our seeing the "something infinite behind everything". He draws our attention to the possibility, the idea, the *fact* perhaps, that the "something behind everything" that we, from time to time, seem to perceive, is a combination of pain and love. Maybe, that is an idea worth exploring.

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